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*Baltimore Revisited: Stories of
Inequality and Resistance in a U. S. City*

- 1 New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780813594026 (cloth)
- 2 Laura Hapke
- 3 There is little doubt that Baltimore’s problems with institutional racism and systemic inequality mirror those of numerous dried up postindustrial towns such as Detroit, Newark, and the onetime company towns dotting the United States. But all politics are indeed local. A once vibrant East Baltimore, in the euphemistic phrase inner city, is of particular interest—even before the President’s damning its citizens (and the Democrats’ misrule, of course) as a place of vermin and decay. In contrast, applying a multi-layered and revisionist approach, the editors argue that “Baltimore is ground zero for rethinking the city” (3). As another reviewer explained, the many experts are founding members of a Baltimore School of Thought (Shrum).
- 4 For Americanists excavating the historiography and archives of economically fraught urbanism, the methods here both mirror and challenge the ideological and social history of working-class Baltimore. Mapping, or social geography, elucidates Baltimore as the “North’s most southern city and the South’s most northern city...and...the biggest city in a border state where slavery flourished” (1). The contending forces created a municipality that was “the first...to mandate race division in” housing (3). (Shades of Freddie Gray’s housing project, a Havenot place noted a number of times in the text) At the same time, by 1850 the metropolis contained the largest African American population of free people (3) (Shades of Frederick Douglass, Baltimore’s most famous escapee from slavery) .
- 5 In the essays that follow, twenty-seven contributors of various stripes employ a dialectic between a southern heritage and a northern counter-narrative. In the bulk of the pieces, writers frame the economic and racial contrast as that of corrupt privatization and true community-based urban renewal. Hence the subtitle, “inequality

and resistance.” While the rubric might seem hackneyed, the writers complicate it in a wealth of contributions, each multi-disciplinary and closely argued. As a reformist cadre, the American Studies scholar (interestingly, the editors do not categorize the anthology as issue-driven) can begin her own foray into Baltimore authors’ theory and praxis. To widen the inquiry, there are lengthy summaries of corporate spin; counter-narratives by photographer activists, community organizers, and even psychologists of the local ghetto’s depressive population (rather a weak piece).

- 6 Taken together, the twenty-seven mixed-genre contributions weave material into a reform chorus. The essays pull no punches. Thus, it is argued effectively that so-called partnerships such as the Broadway Redevelopment Project, only target a harbor area ripe for tourism. In a wider sense, the authors deplore the misallocation of federal and state monies, and a host of other classic problems for poor neighborhoods. All contribute to Maryland’s pervasive “economic violence” as explained in Shannon Darrow’s essay, “‘The People’s Side of the Road’: Movement against Destruction and Organizing across Lines of Race, Class, and Neighborhood.”
- 7 At times the direct relation of dominant motifs to individual sections is ambiguous and makes for hard going. No doubt this need for a metanarrative may only apply to a monograph. But rather than choose a straight chronology, or preface sets of essays with definitions of particular theoretical frames, it seems that the structure of the book is sometimes the result of the decision to chivvy essays into sections reminiscent of conference programs. Despite these challenges, the first part, “Place and Power: Roots of (In)Justice” clearly probes the “roots of injustices in Baltimore ranging from segregated schools to the dawn of the criminalization of drug possession” (3). Fascinating in this regard is Michael Casiano’s “‘The Pot’: Criminalizing Black Neighborhoods in Jim Crow Baltimore.” Meticulous and informative, the essay uncovers “The Pot” in question, as a construction by white mainstream journals which viewed the neighborhood as “an example of black unfitness for city life.” Charting another historical phenomenon is Eli Pousson’s piece, “Vacant Houses and Inequality in Baltimore from the Nineteenth Century to Today.”
- 8 Part two, “Histories of Contestations and Activism in a Legacy City,” builds on the trope of Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the right to the city. The discussions there include those of six plus decades’ successes (1916-1981) with desegregation of theaters (Joe Tropea’s “The Last Censors: the Life and Slow Death of Maryland’s Board of Motion Picture Censors, 1916-1981.”). Notable too is 1960s-1980s dissection of community organizing around an anti-poverty agenda. (Amy Zaroni’s “‘Welfare Isn’t a Single Issue:’ Baltimore’s Welfare Rights Movement, 1960s-1980s”).
- 9 The most innovative section is the third. “Voices from Here: Listening to the Past” creates a rare space for the oral history of polyethnic and sexually diverse populations. Yet the dominant voices are those of the authors, not the subjects. An exception is “Relentlessly Gay: A Conversation on LGBTQ Stories in Baltimore,” transcribed by Drabinski and Louise Parker Kelley. Future studies, though, can rely on essays such as that of Ashley Minner’s on the Lumbee Community, to contextualize monologues by authentic Baltimore life historians.
- 10 The fourth part, “Surviving in the Neoliberal City: Redevelopment in Baltimore,” uses the now common term to denote a place where “corporate interests...eagerly privatize public good and services to maximize profits” (King et al). In a familiar corrupt way, in the name of renewal, mega businesses and their political allies harvest waterfront

properties. This partnership also created glamorized shopping malls, catering, both literally and figuratively, to a middle class with disposable income. In the process, deteriorated housing stock is imploded. One signature example of medicalized real estate is in an essay by Marisela B. Gomez, "Johns Hopkins University and the History of Developing East Baltimore." As with the majority of pieces in the collection, her analysis is multi-layered. She contrasts JHU's walling off large sections of land, once inhabited by local residents, with another large scale development, titled the Gay Street I. The latter sounded out residents about their hopes for a planned housing project. There was minimal relocation; just as importantly, "residents actively participated in... design and planning" (247). The final section picks up on the new archival presentism of previously unheard voices. Of course, the template is that chorus of protest known as the Baltimore Uprising in the wake of Freddie Gray's death. Here, working-class life history intersects African American perspectives and experiences. This democratizing is long overdue, as is its corollary, involving students in gathering and producing public history, explains Denise D. Meringolo's "Building a More Inclusive History of Baltimore: Preserving the Baltimore Uprising."

- 11 While the book is heavy on the latter-day Carpetbaggers, at its core is one question: How does this "ground zero city" reconcile optimism with a past inflected to this day by slavery? One might answer that a wary optimism is at the heart of the resistance that Baltimore has enacted since the days of its most famous escapee from slavery, Frederick Douglass. In the pairing of global and digital, #justiceforFreddie, for example, can do much to reconcile contradictions by holding politicians, from the local to the Congressional, accountable.